

Disdain for democracy: Turkey's failed coup hands Erdoğan the pretext for further repression

Sunday 17 July 2016, by [SAYARER Julian](#) (Date first published: 17 July 2016).

An authoritarian president has been saved by a peoples' faith in democracy. But he is unlikely to credit them.

Turkish politics is seldom what it seems and so a coup late at night, backed with the imposing presence of military hardware, unravels to become an attempted coup come morning. Turkey will now face the prospect of yet another of its paradoxes, in which a public show of support for democracy, with people pouring onto the streets to protect an elected government, could well become the basis by which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, expands his power over the Turkish state and justifies still more of his disdain for democracy.

Whether it was leftist journalists described as plotters, or the liberal Gezi Park movement being smeared as a coup, Erdoğan has always used the spectre of such things to justify his vice grip on the country. Now that he has an actual coup to point to, what comes next is unlikely to be pretty. Those bystanders, mainly far away, who applauded tanks on Turkey's streets as a reassertion of secular values, will most probably be made to eat their wishes.

The idea of appearances being deceiving, however, already warrants further attention. Turkey is a nation of conspiracy, and while much of it is the valid result of a frequently underhand political establishment (and the actions of heavily politicised state actors such as the police), that is not to say that the overall climate is not debilitating. Already, many assert that this was not in fact a coup, but only a staged event intended to bolster Erdoğan's authoritarian goal of circumventing parliament to alter the constitution and claim indefinite powers for the beefed-up office of President that he created for himself. That a de facto dictator can meld events to fit his pre-existing agenda will be interpreted as causation and not only correlation.

Conspiracy has already taken nuanced forms, and in so doing it can come to seem more truthlike. Turkey has NATO's second largest army after that of the US, and it is apparent that early reports of only a rogue faction within the army were accurate - the Turkish Navy offered quick condemnation of the coup, Erdoğan's plane was escorted back to Istanbul by F-16 jets. Some suggest that that faction were fed misinformation in order to give a false impression of the likelihood of victory and so make them the useful idiots in the President's plan.

Others will outright suggest an inside job of coordinated actions and actors, but both should perhaps only receive the oxygen of attention so as to be disregarded. Turkey has a strong tradition of internet censorship and blocked social media; that the internet would have continued to run throughout an artificial coup would seem an unlikely risk to take. Moreover, with more than 200 dead, helicopters shot down and bombs exploding at parliament buildings, there was presumably no need to make it so convincing, nor to gamble on Turkish supporters of democracy actually taking to

the streets. Had more of the military been involved, and willing to commit bloodshed, that prospect would have been a whole new hell in a country already too familiar with the loss of life.

Social media and modern communication tools have added to events a further layer that merits attention. The irony of Erdoğan, such a vicious opponent of dissent and protest, calling on people to take to the streets, will not go unnoticed. Having frequently suggested that platforms such as Twitter are proponents of social unrest, we can only hope he noticed how useful it was when he – stripped of much state apparatus – wanted to mobilise his following. Further evidence for the veracity of the coup would be his own appearance, via a smartphone and Skype, broadcasting to the nation that a coup was underway and would be dealt with. It is highly improbable that a man so obsessed with his own power and presentation of it would have willingly and deliberately shown himself in such a position of vulnerability, were it not the only remaining resource that he had.

There is an asymmetry to social media platforms that normally gives powers of broadcast and mobilisation to the powerless, what we have seen in this coup attempt – seemingly – is those same powers being harnessed by the powerful to maintain control at a time when they are temporarily without the institutions that augment any government. In itself, this is a partial reminder of a lesson so often overlooked by authoritarian personalities the world over, underlining that the granting of social freedoms tends to increase rather than diminish social function and harmony.

It is far too early to judge what happens next, and aside from a rising death count we know far, far less than we don't know. There is an obvious likelihood that the coup attempt was a fruit of the soured relationship between Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen, the Pennsylvania-based founder of an Islamist doctrine perceived by Erdoğan as a threat. That this is not at all about faith, and all about the power struggle and animosity between two friends turned foes, should be foremost in any outside view of the situation.

For the people of Turkey, and their actions overnight – resisting tanks, removing armed soldiers from civic buildings, journalists refusing to stop broadcasting until overpowered – they have everything of which to be proud, and underline that a spirit of democracy is far deeper in the people of that country than either their own government permit, or the rest of the world understands. From Atatürk's Republican Party (CHP) to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), who have withstood such harassment and brutality in representing the Kurdish people Erdoğan increasingly persecutes, the entire political landscape in Turkey – despite their very real hatred for one another – stood firm to condemn the military as a means of settling or improving differences. Erdoğan himself, less popular than he once was and prone at all times to thuggish tendencies, has been saved by a peoples' faith in democracy. We hope against hope that he realises it.

Julian Sayerer

P.S.

*

* Julian Sayerer is cycling from London to Istanbul, he blogs at thisisnotforcharity.com, follow him on Twitter @julian_sayare